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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004834

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TAGS: PREL PINS KISL RP

SUBJECT: AMPATUAN CLAN CLAIMS SUPPORT FOR PEACE PROCESS,
BUT VIES WITH MILF

REF: A. MANILA 4802
 1B. MANILA 4656
 1C. MANILA 4221

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. During a meeting with dozens of leaders of one of Central Mindanao's most powerful clans, Governors Andal and Zaldy Ampatuan told DCM and Embassy delegation that they support the MILF peace process and want to work closely with the USG. The Governors blamed the MILF for sporadic local fighting, including assassination attempts against the Ampatuans, and for harboring terrorists. They were highly appreciative of US assistance, and requested that US-Philippines Balikatan military exercises and civil-military operations take place in their Central Mindanao provinces. They supported consultations among the government, MILF, and local leaders to improve security, while maintaining that local armed militia continued to be necessary to protect the people. (Note: these Civil Volunteer Organizations are viewed by some, including the lead government negotiator, as destabilizing.) The Ampatuans and certain MILF local commanders remain engaged in a feud/land dispute, which leaves key parts of Central Mindanao prone to local fighting. Their larger contest is for political control of Muslim Mindanao, which the Ampatuans currently have and do not want to relinquish to the MILF as part of the peace process. Our meeting took place in the opulent, near-complete provincial capitol building in Shariff Aguak, Maguindanao, which presides over an agriculturally rich and conflicted region. End Summary.

Ampatuans Want Peace, Security, and Development

12. (SBU) Deputy Chief of Mission, Political Counselor, and Poloff discussed peace, security, and development with the patriarch of the Ampatuan Clan -- Maguindanao Provincial Governor Andal Ampatuan -- and ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan at the Maguindanao capital of Shariff Aguak on November 17. Present with the Ampatuans in a spacious conference room within the provincial capital building were the appointed governor of the newly created ARMM province of Shariff Kabunsuan -- Bimbo Q. Sinsuat (the son-in-law of Andal Ampatuan) -- and over 15 other regional, provincial, and municipal level officials.

13. (C) Maguindanao Governor Ampatuan and his son ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan expressed support for the GRP-MILF peace process and the resumption of GRP-MILF peace talks in Kuala Lumpur. They particularly welcomed DCM's remarks regarding USAID's assistance programs in conflict affected areas of Mindanao.

MILF Viewed as Threat

¶4. (C) In his comments, which were supplemented by a one-page written document handed to Emboffs, Maguindanao Governor Ampatuan blamed the MILF for all of the outbreaks of sporadic fighting in Maguindanao. Ampatuan also accused the MILF of supporting JI members and other terrorists noting that no foreign individuals could remain in MILF controlled territories without the knowledge of MILF members.

¶5. (C) The one-page document described the Ampatuan Clan as the "last bastion" of pro-GRP supporters in Maguindanao Province, and among the only Muslim political and clan leaders consistently trusted by Presidents of the Philippines, including Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. The document also asserted that the MILF considered the Ampatuan Clan as its most prominent political enemy, in addition to a stumbling block to all anti-GRP activities of the MILF and other rebel groups.

¶6. (C) Provincial Administrator Unas claimed that the MILF and "other armed enemies of the GRP" were responsible for six bombings, ambushes, and other assassination attempts against Maguindanao Governor Ampatuan and members of the Ampatuan family, including the December 24, 2002, bombing that killed the Governor's son, Saudie Ampatuan. Unas also mentioned the two explosions from mortar attacks that occurred outside of the Shariff Kabunsuan Complex in Cotabato City while ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan delivered his second State of the Region Address on November 13.

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Help Wanted

¶7. (C) ARMM Governor Ampatuan was deeply appreciative of US assistance, and requested consideration of additional U.S. development assistance for elementary and secondary education, medical outreach, road infrastructure, and livelihood programs. He requested that US-Philippine Balikatan exercises and civil-military operations be held in Maguindanao and Shariff Kabunsuan Provinces to improve the security situation in central Mindanao.

¶8. (C) Governor Ampatuan appealed for the U.S. Embassy to use its influence with Malacanang to bring about consultations between the GRP, MILF, ARMM Regional Government, and local governments regarding the GRP-MILF peace process. There has been growing frustration at the grassroots level, particularly among local governments, over being left behind in the peace process, according to Ampatuan.

CVOs Needed For Security

¶9. (C) Governor Ampatuan expressed support for armed Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) as security forces. Ampatuan claimed that CVOs -- which have been criticized in the past for serving as private armies for local politicians -- were under the operational and administrative control of the Philippine National Police, and remained a major component for security within the region.

Local Flashpoint for Armed Conflict

¶10. (C) International Monitoring Team (IMT) Head of Mission Major General Dato Md Ismael Bin Ahmad Khan told DCM and

Poloff on November 17 that the GRP-MILF ceasefire continued to hold and that the primary remaining "flashpoint" for armed conflict in central Mindanao was Maguindanao. Although the MILF 105th Base Command was replaced by the MILF 104th Base Command in parts of this area, sporadic clashes continued to occur between the MILF and CVOs/Armed Forces of the Philippines. Eliminating the potential for violence near Shariff Aguak would remain a challenge, according to IMT Head Khan, until the feud/land dispute between the Ampatuans and elements of the MILF could be resolved.

¶11. (C) IMT Head Khan welcomed the recent addition of a Japanese development expert to the IMT Headquarters in Cotabato City, and he hoped for future deployment of several representatives from Sweden to the IMT. He also welcomed a greater U.S. role in the peace process, including U.S. development assistance for conflict affected areas in Mindanao.

Comment:

¶12. (C) The Ampatuan Clan, which controls governors and mayors in key parts of Central Mindanao, is a formidable factor in the peace process. The Ampatuans wrested political control of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao from the MNLF, which had received that control via its 1996 peace agreement with the government. The Ampatuans do not want to relinquish their political control to the MILF in its peace process. Their feud/land dispute with local MILF commanders is a manifestation of this power-contest, which will continue to require the management by the Philippine Armed Forces and the International Monitoring Team.

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KENNEY